

THE AFARS IN ABA'ALA: MODES OF LIVELIHOOD AND RELATIONS WITH TIGRAYAN HIGHLANDERS

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1. INTRODUCTION

A considerable part (about 60%) of the African continent can be categorized as arid or semi arid, characterised by high temperature; low, unreliable and variable rainfall; environmental degradation; and resultant recurrent drought and famine (Helland 1990).

Over 50% of the world's pastoralists (approximately 20 million people) live in the African drylands, 75% of which are found in four countries of Eastern Africa: Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and Sudan.

Since the alarming report of the drought disaster in the Sahl-Somalia region, there has been an increasing interest in the study of the physical, ecological and social processes of pastoral societies (Brandstrom 1979, 9).

Unfortunately, a number of books and articles on pastoralism have portrayed a stereotyped representation of the system. Early writers (for example, Belfield 1914 cited in Fratkin 1994, 47; Herkovitz 1926) have described pastoralists as "inefficient" and "wasteful" people having an "irrational" attachment to their livestock with little or no concern for their environment.

Others (such as Ricciardi 1971; Riefenstahl 1982; Amin 1983) have even gone to the point of stating that pastoralists can be equated with other forms of African wildlife. For these writers, pastoralists are easily distinguishable by their exotic and romantic dresses and bearing. These writers also accuse pastoralists for willingly categorizing themselves in the definition of the "noble savages" since they resist change and disdain the modern world.

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Therefore, for colonial and post-colonial development and government experts, the dominant image of pastoralists was of lazy, warlike, lawless people who wandered around looking for pasture (Fratkin 1994).

One of the pioneering studies that countered these assumptions is found in the structural functionalist study of agro-pastoralism in East Africa. In this connection, the study of African customary law within the context of political organization dates back to the 1940s when Edward Evans-Pritchard studied the Nilotic people of the Sudan.

1.1 Description of the Study Area

1.1.1 *The People*

The Afars are Cushitic speaking people living in the arid and semi-arid areas of Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti. Various people have referred to the Afar using different terms such as Danakil, Adal and Teltal even though the Afar liked none of them (Savard 1970). The Afars are estimated at 800,000 (Ali 1994).

The Afar are classified into two distinct groups depending on descent. These are the Asaimara (the "Red") and Adaimara (the "White"). While the former are considered a nobility group, the latter are taken as forming the class of the commons (Lewis 1969).

Traditionally, their economy was based on multi-species livestock husbandry. However, with increased vulnerability to draught and famine due to ecological disasters, they now mainly depend on camel and goat pastoralism.

The Afars in Aba'ala are agro-pastoralists who combine animal husbandry with marginal agriculture. Their settlements are semi-sedentary and are situated near permanent water sources and small urban centres. Since rainfed agriculture alone is often not promising, they employ water diversion techniques as well to grow their crops.

1.1.2 *The Study Area*

Aba'ala is the name of an administrative unit in the present Afar Regional State established at a *wereda* level. The principal town of the *wereda* is known by the same name Aba'ala and is the capital of Zone Two Administration of the Afar Region.

The research was carried out in the capital, Aba'ala, found 53 kilometres East of Mekelle and two other nearby settlement areas named Adi Haremeli and Erkudi located at a distance of 5-7 kilometres from Aba'ala town. The study areas were selected based on their proximity to the boundary of the two ethnic groups so that it would be possible to see the interaction between the Afar lowlanders and the Tigrayan highlanders.

1.2 Data Collection Methods

The study employed informal interviews with local residents, semi-structured interviews with 46 elderly key-informants, case studies, and participant observation.

2. ECONOMY AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

2.1 Conditions of Labour, Livestock and Land

The land use pattern in Aba'ala has passed through significant transformations across historical and socio-political periods. The Afars in Aba'ala relied on nomadic pastoralism for their livelihood. This production system was founded on the pastoral philosophy of private livestock in communal land. This enabled them to move freely in the different ecological sub-zones at varying seasons, which guaranteed an optimum use of the temporally and spatially variable resources.

In the past, each household in Aba'ala settlements enjoyed the ownership of adequate or more than adequate livestock and had strong economic and social set-ups. There was sharing and transfer of resources on different occasions. Livestock were used as media of transaction. However, ownership of a large herd size did not determine a man's place in the society.

During the reign of Emperor Haileselassie, situations began to change. The Tigrayan nobility and a few immigrants from the highlands cleared a large portion of the lowlands for cultivation and introduced a new form of land use system. However, in the earlier phases of such changes the pastoral mode of production was still dominant.

Before taking up the present system of production, the Afars in Aba'ala have been developing complex adjustment techniques, such as owning large herd size and raising multi-species livestock to minimize the risk of being driven out of the pastoral mode of living. Both herd diversification and herd size maximization were forms of traditional resource management systems

designed to minimize risk in an environment where insecurity is the biggest problem. Besides, diversification is economically advantageous because the different species can be utilized for different purposes. Camels are mainly used for milk and transport cattle are raised for their milk and their skin (to make beds of *Oloiyta*). Goats are used for similar purposes: milk, market and skin for making an apparatus for carrying water. Moreover, some of the livestock are used in some social events. Herd diversification also helps to efficiently utilize available resources by avoiding severe degradation as the different species have different feeding behaviours. Furthermore, the pastoralists established large supporting networks by offering livestock as gifts to their impoverished kin and in the form of political and judicial alliance with the neighbouring highlanders.

After the 1975 land proclamation, the *Derg* government encouraged agriculture rather than livestock husbandry. Therefore, a significant proportion of the pastoral land continued to be lost to cultivation.

Ecological changes and a decline in their resource base forced the pastoralists to devise new strategies such as rearing only draught resistant species such as camels and goats, and adopting sedentary life. Some writers have observed a similar situation among other pastoralist groups. For example, Hogg (1990, 106) indicates that changes in the settlement pattern among the Somali pastoralists in southern Ethiopia had implications for issues of land use. Regular mobility gave way to permanent settlement leading to the emergence of a new attitude toward land ownership and territoriality.

Even under the harsh ecological conditions in which they live, the Afar pastoralists are now forced to show a greater inclination towards agriculture as a means of subsistence. They produce barely, maize, sorghum and other cereals. During the main rainy season (*Karma*) in July and August, they make use of the rain in the highland areas that flood flows to the lowland areas. Crops are grown using flood diversion. Much of such flood is carried by Aba'ala River near the Aba'ala town, Mai Shugala River near Adiharemeli and Murga farther north of the town. Aba'ala and Murga rivers dry up in the hottest months of the year, May and June (*Hagai*); the latter dries up completely a bit earlier. As a result, the pressure on Aba'ala River increases in the dry season as herders from Murga areas also water their livestock in the river.

Today, owing to the ecological disasters and the resultant vulnerability to drought and famine, livestock husbandry is being greatly threatened in the area. They agree to sharecrop with Tigrayan farmers who would see through the whole process of cultivation and would then take from half to a

fourth of the produce depending on their agreement. In addition, some have managed to augment their meagre income by migrating to towns or abroad.

The availability of pasture and water can also decrease because of ill-conceived government policies on development (ILCA 1981; Hjort 1982; Baxter 1991; Ali 1997). However, there are no large projects in Aba'ala competing for land. However, they are unable to utilize all their rangelands because of local bandits (*Egugumo*) in areas far from permanent settlements. This has restricted their movement and facilitated sedentary life. In addition, social services such as schools, health, veterinary services and power supply have attracted people to Aba'ala town.

2.2 Kinship and Marriage

Among the Afars in Aba'ala, descent and affiliation play a significant role in their social organization. Descent is traced patrilineally. Based on descent, a person belongs to a particular clan (*mela*). Clan identity is important in social, economic and political alliance. Clan members are expected to share resources and help each other in times of trouble.

Each clan does not have a unique territory. So there is no perfect match between the clans and settlement areas. However, each settlement area is identified with a major clan. Individuals often align with clan members territorially and benefit from social, economic and political support. The dominant clans are Seka (the largest), Damohita, Dahimella, and Hadarmo. Each is again divided into several sub-clans and lineages (*Affa*). Clans get representation by clan heads. This leadership status is given based on the person's age, strength in decision-making and his overall credibility in the society. This position is partly inherited. Upon the death of a clan head, his sons will be considered for the position but if they lack the necessary quality of leadership, an election has to be arranged. Clan heads are entrusted with the responsibility of regulating the behaviours of clan members and ensuring social, economic and political security.

Marriage alliances are also important. Though the usual Afar custom is marriage between cousins, this may not be the case among the Afar in Aba'ala (Simonsen 1996, 28). However, such marriages may have adaptive values, as it is easier to get help when a person's sub-clan members are nearby.

2.3 Social Status, Household Property Relations and the Role of Women

In a typical Afar family, the father is the head. He is generally accepted as an authority figure and has the greatest share of rights over property and children. He also carries out decisions on such matters as mobility and the sale of livestock.

Simonsen (1996, 37) states that Afar women of the Wossama locality are given equal rights. This does not hold true among Afar women in the study area. On the contrary, their inequality is reflected in several social events. Right from the outset, boys and girls do not receive equal number of goats as soon as they are born. Besides, when the head of the family dies, the female children do not inherit property equally with the male children. Moreover, a woman's evidence is given less weight. If divorced, the wife is allowed to take only what she brought from her parents' house. Women are not allowed in decision making processes. Regarding domestic roles, husband does the herding, milking and selling of animals (following a discussion with his wife). The wife fetches water, grinds, prepares food and sells milk. Children play a big role in herding and related activities.

3. AFAR RELATIONS WITH TIGRAYAN HIGHLANDERS

The Afars trace the settlement of Tigrayans in Aba'ala to the time of Mengesha Seyoum. Before then, it was inhabited exclusively by the Afar. In the 1960s, the Tigrayan nobility developed interest in exploiting resources in the lowlands of Aba'ala. Mengesha, then governor of Tigray province, linked Aba'ala with the highlands by dry weather road. He then brought some peasants from the highlands to make charcoal in Aba'ala that will be sold in the big towns of the highlands. These people later established families and permanently settled with their children in Aba'ala.

In general, Afar relations with the Tigrayan highlanders in this part of Ethiopia are multifaceted extending from a state of prejudice, enmity and feud to that of mutual co-operation, integration and peaceful co-existence.

3.1 Trade

According to Abir (cited in Assefa 1995, 117), the beginning of salt trade in the Afar depression is a historic moment in the establishment of highland-lowland interaction.

Aba'ala and much of the northern parts of the present Afar Regional State had been under the Tigray provincial administration in the times prior to the reign of the EPRDF. This created free movement of politicians and ordinary Tigrayans into the area and created a good ground for them to establish social ties with the Afar. Today, the Tigrayans that live in the western plateau of Amentilla, Akeza and Milazat are the Afar's main trading partners.

3.2 Kinship and Intermarriage

Sometimes social relationships in trade and exchange develop into kinship ties. In principle, intermarriage between members of the two ethnic groups is not allowed because of religious restrictions. However, in practice, there are several instances of this form marriage. Historically, some Tigrayan kings and politically influential personalities are believed to have "Afar blood"; Emperor Yohannes and Sebagadis of Agame are cases in point.

3.3 Resource Sharing and Management

We can speak of the territory linking Aba'ala with the Didiba-Dirgajen area in Tigray region as an interface zone between the Afar and the Tigrayans as there is cross-territory resource sharing between the two communities. During the wet season, the highlanders in Milazat, Akeza and Amentilla localities move to the lowland areas for cultivation. The population densities in some areas in the highlands have forced the Tigrayans to move to the lowlands to work for the Afar and share the produce. This has further cemented ties between the two peoples. Similarly, in the dry season, a group of Afar pastoralists take their herds to the highlands mainly for pasture. In the beginning, this was not welcome by government officials who suggested that grazing land should be demarcated to prevent competition for and conflict over the same resource. The proposal was rejected by the local communities at both sides of the territory who preferred peaceful joint use of available resources.

The highlands of Tigray adjacent to Aba'ala are closed for grazing to allow the vegetation to regenerate. The highland parts of Aba'ala also contain areas restricted for dry-season grazing. There are very strict rules concerning the management of such resources accepted by both ethnic groups. During the wet season, no herder is allowed to drive his livestock into these areas. A small part of the restricted area is exceptionally allowed for grazing by oxen. This is because oxen are used in ploughing and should not be made to travel a long distance for feed.

3.4 Conflict and Conflict Management

3.4.1 *The Nature of Inter-ethnic Conflict*

Afar relations with Tigrayans in the Didib-Dirgajen area toward the northwest have generally been good, whereas, relations in the Wajirat area to the southwest have been bitter. In the past, the Afar experienced a series of raids. In what is locally known as *Gas* expedition. The Tigrayans mobilized hundreds of local relatives and villagers for the raid, which resulted in a tremendous loss of life and property. The Wajirat not only killed any Afar whom they found on their way, they also took away a large number of livestock. Sometimes, they even killed the livestock on the spot. As Gebru (1991, 94) points out, the motive for such raids was not only economic but also ritualistic as the raids were also important social events where young men demonstrated their qualities as warriors and potential ceremonial leaders. Courage and physical strength were measured in terms of involvement in these campaigns, which enhanced a man's prospects for marriage and political office.

Today, these raids are less common. This can be attributed to changes both in the Afar land and in the Wajirat highlands. With the gradual adoption of agriculture, the Afars' old attitude toward land tenure has changed and there has been a tremendous decline in transhumant mobility towards the highlands. This decline in mobility has also been caused by a constant decrease of herd size for which there is enough pasture in the lowland territories.

Besides, there seems to be a gradual shift in the balance of power between the two groups. The Afars are gaining access to armaments on equal basis with the Wajirat. They have been given their own regional administration under the present ethnic based federalism in Ethiopia. This allowed the Afars to re-define their identity. Clan differences have become less important and they now see themselves as a group, which makes them stronger. There are only occasional incidents of killings and reprisals. At present, though the Wajirat highlanders often raise some questions of boundary (*Deka*), they usually do not express it armed confrontation.

3.4.2 *The Gereb: An Institution of Inter-ethnic Conflict Resolution*

Whenever disputes arise between members of the two ethnic groups, the cases are handled by an institution called *Gareb*. Unlike the institution of intra-ethnic conflict management among the Afar, the *Gereb* bases itself on written laws that are drafted with the consent of elders from both groups. The laws are under constant reform to accommodate new situations. Recently, government administrative units are aiding the *Gereb* in

implementing the decisions/verdicts made by the council of elders and are providing logistical support.

Members of the *Gereb* council are elected by the people on both sides of the ethnic boundary based on their proven ability in sound decision making, impartiality and honesty. Once a month, representatives from both ethnic groups (*Abo Gereb*) hold a regular meeting to discuss security problems. Whenever there is an extraordinary affair, they assemble twice a month. The gathering is held at varying places. If an offence is committed by a Tigrayan, the Tigrayans have to send their representatives (*Abo Gereb*) to Aba'ala for the meeting. If the offence is committed by an Afar, the meeting will be held in a Tigrayan locality. Unlike the situation within the Afar themselves, all compensations in an inter-ethnic context are paid in cash. Table 16 gives some of the rules (*Sirit*) of the *Gereb* regarding cash compensation.

Table 16. Types of cash compensation

Type of offence	Compensation	Remark
Stealing goat or sheep	50Birr per head*	Irrespective of the size
Stealing of oxen or cow (Genzeb)	500Birr per head	Irrespective of the size
Camel Stealing	800Birr per head	Irrespective of the size
Murder	5,000Birr +100Birr <i>Megeberia</i>	Irrespective of age and sex
Physical injury leading to loss of body part	1,500Birr	Irrespective of age and sex
Physical injury not leading to loss of body parts	500Birr	Irrespective of age and sex

* Ethiopian Birr 8.50 = US Dollars 1

4. CONCLUSION

The pastoral economy of the Afar is declining. They are engaging in various activities to augment their ever-decreasing income. This is evident from their current inclination toward cultivation and wage labour migration.

With the emergence of new land tenure system based on private ownership, they developed a new attitude toward territoriality. This has led to competition over productive resources and ultimately to conflict.

Traditionally, the confrontations that occurred between the Afar and Tigrayans emanated from competition over meagre resources. However, the present state of hostility and occasional killings is explained by unfavourable past history rather than resource conflict. At present, several factors contribute for the decrease of raids. These include i) a change in the traditional political organization in the highlands; ii) the emergence of a new "ethnic" identity among the Afar following the establishment of the federal system of administration in Ethiopia; and 3) the development of a power balance as the Afar began to penetrate into national affairs with active involvement in the police and defence forces. Even when conflicts occur, they are solved by using indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms such as the *Gereb*.

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Table 1: Types of ruminant compensation.

Type of offense	Compensation	Remarks
Stealing goat or sheep	50000 per head	100000 per head if the thief is not found. The case is referred to the court.
Stealing of rams or lambs	10000 per head	
Murder	1000000	
Physical injury	10000 per head	
Physical injury leading to loss of part	10000 per head	